

# SOME REMARKS ON THE APSE MOSAIC OF ST. SOPHIA

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Many different datings have been proposed for the large apse mosaic of St. Sophia, uncovered by Th. Whittemore between 1935 and 1939, and restored and studied by C. Mango and E. J. W. Hawkins in 1964: its last major publication<sup>1</sup> includes a detailed list of past scholarly opinions, ranging from the eighth to the fourteenth century. Mango and Hawkins observed it closely and arrived at the conclusion that the whole mosaic, that is, the seated Virgin and Child, the two archangels on either side, and the inscription running along the face of the apse semidome, were all made at the same time. And, as the inscription commemorates the restoration by the pious emperors of some icons destroyed by the Iconoclasts,<sup>2</sup> it has been deduced that the mosaic must date to the ninth century, and that the homily which Photios read in St. Sophia on 29 March 867 to celebrate the unveiling of the first image of the Virgin to be restored in the Great Church, was written for it.

The mosaic preserved today in the center of the apse semidome represents a Virgin seated, looking straight ahead, "with the Child in her lap. She rests her right hand on the Child's right shoulder, and her left, which holds a handkerchief, on the Child's left knee."<sup>3</sup> The Child holds a scroll. The Virgin's throne is decorated, has no back, and its seat is covered with two long cylindrical cushions. "Although the Virgin is meant to be resting on them, the cushions give the impression of being laid behind her back."<sup>4</sup> The background is entirely covered with gold tesserae (fig. 1).

<sup>1</sup>C. Mango and E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Apse Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul. Report on Work Carried Out in 1964," *DOP*, 19 (1965), 113–51 and figs. 1–56. In this publication, one will find references to all previous literature. I am grateful to Prof. Mango who read a draft of this paper and shared his thoughts with me.

<sup>2</sup>For the inscription and its date, see *infra*.

<sup>3</sup>Mango-Hawkins, "Apse Mosaics," 116.

<sup>4</sup>Mango-Hawkins, "Apse Mosaics," 123.

Can this image be the one which Patriarch Photios referred to in 867 and other medieval authors described later?

The Photios text has been studied closely by several scholars, who have repeatedly pointed out that there are serious discrepancies between the actual mosaic and what Photios says in his sermon.<sup>5</sup> It may be said on this point that: a. Photios speaks of "colors" (*χρωμάτων*), of "the art of painting" (*ζωγράφος τέχνη*),<sup>6</sup> which, if taken literally, would seem to refer to a painting rather than a mosaic; b. Photios speaks of a standing figure (*ἀκίνητος ἔστηκε*),<sup>7</sup> not of a seated one; c. Photios describes the Child as "reclining as an infant" (*ώς βρέφος ἀνακλινόμενον*)<sup>8</sup> and adds that the Virgin "is carrying the Creator in her arms as an infant" (*ώς βρέφος ἀγκαλοφοροῦσα*),<sup>9</sup> "holding him in her arms as an infant" (*χερσὶν ώς βρέφος βαστάζει*),<sup>10</sup> expressions that can hardly correspond to the St. Sophia mosaic as we see it today; d. Photios says that the Virgin "fondly turns her eyes on her begotten Child in the affection of her heart" (*τῇ μὲν στοργῇ τῶν σπλάγχνων τὴν ὄψιν ποδὸς τὸ τεχθὲν συμπαθῶς ἐπιστρέφουσα*);<sup>11</sup> this also has nothing to do with the Vir-

<sup>5</sup>S. Šestakov, in *VizVrem*, 9 (1902), 537 f.; C. Mango, "Documentary Evidence on the Apse Mosaics of St. Sophia," *BZ*, 47 (1954), 395 f.; C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 284. In these earlier publications Mango had already established that the Virgin described by Photios was an Hodegetria. A similar point of view was expressed by A. Grabar, *L'iconoclasme byzantin. Dossier archéologique* (Paris, 1957), 185; but this author, not knowing our second text, questions the assumption that the icon should be sought in the apse of St. Sophia.

<sup>6</sup>S. Aristarches, *Φωτίου πατριάρχου Κωνσταντινουπόλεως Λόγοι καὶ ὘μλακα*, II (Constantinople, 1900), 299, 301; cf. Mango, *The Homilies*, 290, 292.

<sup>7</sup>Aristarches, 307; cf. Mango, *The Homilies*, 295.

<sup>8</sup>Aristarches, 299; cf. Mango, *The Homilies*, 290.

<sup>9</sup>Aristarches, 306–7; cf. Mango, *The Homilies*, 295.

<sup>10</sup>Aristarches, 305; cf. Mango, *The Homilies*, 294.

<sup>11</sup>Aristarches, 299; cf. Mango, *The Homilies*, 290.

gin in the mosaic, whose gaze is directed straight ahead, above her Child's head.

Thus, if taken literally, Photios speaks of a painting, representing the Virgin standing and holding the Child in her arms—a Virgin of the type known as Hodegetria. But where was this image situated? There is no compelling reason for believing that Photios refers to the apse. What he describes, however, was certainly in St. Sophia and constituted the first pictorial decoration that was unveiled there, after the iconoclastic period. Consequently, there are very strong reasons to suppose that he is referring to the decoration of the apse which was going to be followed by further images of saints ( $\tauὰ τῶν ἀγίων μορφώματα$ ).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a second text, which will be discussed below, proves that Photios' image of the Virgin was actually in the apse.

In order to resolve the contradictions between Photios' text and the preserved mosaic Mango and Hawkins,<sup>13</sup> following R. Jenkins,<sup>14</sup> attributed them to the fluidity of the Byzantine language. On the other hand, P. Speck commented on Photios' oration and tried to provide a symbolic interpretation of the passages under discussion.<sup>15</sup>

The fourteenth-century text just mentioned shows beyond any doubt that the St. Sophia apse was decorated with a standing figure of the Virgin: this is the Life of Patriarch Isidoros Boucheiras (1347–49), written by Patriarch Philotheos Kokkinos some time between 1355 and 1363.<sup>16</sup> It contains the description of a vision which Isidoros himself, then metropolitan of Monembasia, had on 6 January 1347 and of which he spoke to Philotheos, who reports it. Isidoros dreamt that he was participating in a procession that had arrived at St. Sophia. While he stood at the ambo, near the center of the building, he saw the Virgin, who was rep-

<sup>12</sup> Aristarches, 304; cf. Mango, *The Homilies*, 293.

<sup>13</sup> Mango-Hawkins, "Apse Mosaics," 143.

<sup>14</sup> BZ, 52 (1959), 400.

<sup>15</sup> P. Speck, "Photios über das Apsis-Mosaik der Hagia Sophia," *Hellenika*, 30 (1977/78), 399–403.

<sup>16</sup> Text published by A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, "Žitija dvuh vselenskih patriarhov XIV v., Svv. Athanasijs I i Isidora I," *Zapiski Istorikofilologičeskago Fakulteta imperatorskago S.-Peterburgskago Universiteta*, 76 (1905), 52–149. The date can be established from internal evidence: several years after Isidoros' death (mention of posthumous miracles); after John VI Kantakouzenos was deposed (1354) and some time before 1373, since Andronikos IV (who fell in disgrace in 1373) is mentioned as being "the second emperor after his father [John V] and the first heir to the throne" (p. 136). In the conclusion of his speech, Philotheos turns to "the successor and friend and colleague" of the "great patriarch" (Isidoros), and thus implies that, when he wrote, the patriarchal throne was occupied by Kallistos I, who succeeded Isidoros in 1350 and reigned twice, 1350–1353 and 1355–1363. The second patriarchate of Kallistos is the only possibility.

resented above the patriarch's seat, come down to him "as if she came out of a house with a door" (ῶσπερ ἐκ τινος οἰκίας . . . προϊοῦσα καὶ θύρας) and invite him to occupy the patriarch's seat (τὴν μεγάλην προεδρίαν . . . καὶ τὴν καθέδραν), where "she herself dwells standing" (ἰσταμένη διατελῶ). After some discussion, the Virgin returned to her icon "as if through a door" (ὡς διά τινος πύλης). Isidoros tried to go closer to her and found himself inside the bema (τῶν ἱερῶν ἀδυτῶν); then he saw again the Virgin come down "from there" (ἐκεῖθεν) and tell him clearly that he was going to become the patriarch.<sup>17</sup>

We are told, then, that the image of the Virgin was situated above the patriarch's throne; this, obviously, means the semidome of the apse, which was above the synthronon at the center of which was the patriarch's seat. When the Virgin approached Isidoros at the ambo, she had to go through the door of the bema, which is mentioned twice. But the door is not mentioned again when Isidoros too is in the bema. If one takes into consideration the fact that behind the center of the synthronon there are large windows, it becomes obvious that the icon of the Virgin mentioned here, which had to be a large-scale one since it was visible from all over the church, is that in the semidome. And there is no doubt that in 1347 this Virgin was not seated, for the expression *ισταμένη διατελῶ* cannot be understood in any way other than designating a Virgin in a standing position. This was the image that Philotheos and his intended readers knew in the apse of St. Sophia between 1355 and 1363. Consequently, one may assume that the mosaic of the apse as it exists today was not visible when Philotheos wrote the Life of St. Isidoros.

Important works took place in St. Sophia during the second part of the fourteenth century. In May 1346, eight months before Isidoros' vision, the great eastern arch of St. Sophia fell, together with part of the great dome. The apse seems not to have been affected—and this is confirmed by the text of the Life. Work for repairs started immediately, but the process was probably long: the reconstruction of the dome was completed by 1354 and, according to Kantakouzenos, the restoration of the mosaics began during his reign (i.e., before 1354). It certainly continued after his downfall, but it is not known for how long.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Papadopoulos-Kerameus, "Žitija," 110–15. This text is quoted by Mango-Hawkins, "Apse Mosaics," 146–47.

<sup>18</sup> C. Mango, *Materials for the Study of the Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul*, DOS, VIII (Washington, D.C., 1962), 66–68.



I. Istanbul, St. Sophia. Apse Mosaic



2. St. Sophia, Apse Semidome.  
Inscription, Last Nine Letters



3. St. Sophia,  
North Tympanum.  
Inscription with  
the Name "Ioannes"



4. Seal of Patriarch  
Neilos (1383),  
obverse

5. Seal of Patriarch  
Kallistos (1350–53,  
1355–63), obverse



6. Seal of Patriarch  
Photios (858–67,  
877–86), obverse

The fact that the apse resisted the catastrophe of 1346 does not necessarily mean that its decoration remained intact. Further, one may suppose that it suffered with the rest of the church during the terrible earthquakes (14 and 18 October, and 20 November 1343; 6 November 1344), during which a large fissure apparently appeared in the building. Moreover, for some time between 1346 and 1355 there was an opening in the roof of the church—and the interior was exposed. All this allows us to assume that the apse decoration had deteriorated to the point where it needed replacement.

The existing mosaic of the apse should have been unveiled some years after the composition of Isidoros' Life. As Galavaris has already pointed out,<sup>19</sup> this must have occurred before 1383; at that date on the seal of Patriarch Neilos of Constantinople (1380–88) appears for the first time a representation of the Virgin that could be a copy of this mosaic (fig. 4); she is seated with the Child in her lap; and, what is more important for us, her throne is without back and is covered with two cylindrical cushions<sup>20</sup> (two cushions that reappear in the *Peribleptos* of Mystra). This is a radical change when the iconography is compared to that of pre–1380 patriarchal seals on which the Virgin's throne has always a high and decorated back and a seat covered with only one cushion (fig. 5). And this new type appears on the patriarchal seal at a moment which could be close to the unveiling of the apse mosaic of St. Sophia. A possibility comes naturally to mind: the mosaic must have been unveiled before the enthronization of Patriarch Neilos (1380), since he adopted it for his seal presumably from the beginning of his patriarchate.

One would thus be led to attribute the existing apse mosaic to the late fourteenth century. But is this possible? We have already said that scholars have attributed it to practically any time between the eighth and the fourteenth century, mainly on

<sup>19</sup>G. Galavaris, "The Representations of the Virgin and Child on a 'Thokos' on Seals of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchs," *Δελτ. Χριστ. Αρχ.* *Ετ.*, 4/2 (1960/61), 153–81. Cf. G. Galavaris, "Observations on the Date of the Apse Mosaic of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople," *Actes du XII<sup>e</sup> Congrès international d'Etudes byzantines*, III (Belgrade, 1964), 107–10. Galavaris' theory has been readily accepted by Laurent (see following footnote).

<sup>20</sup>V. Laurent, *Le Corpus des Sceaux de l'Empire byzantin*, V/1 (Paris, 1963), no. 45. This is the only representation of the Virgin that appears on Neilos' several preserved seals (as well as on those of his successors). The date 1383 is given here as terminus ante for the introduction of this new iconography because one of the known specimens still hangs from the document of 1383 that it was meant to certify.

the basis of stylistic criteria. Since I am not competent in matters of style, in what follows I shall ignore stylistic considerations. But what I cannot ignore is the incontrovertible archeological evidence supplied by Mango-Hawkins, showing that the existing "Virgin and Child was made prior to the general gold ground of the semidome, which was made before the garland border . . . , made simultaneously with the . . . inscription . . .," and, consequently, that "the Virgin must have been made before—even if only a very short time before—the inscription."<sup>21</sup> Thus, one must now consider the date of the inscription.

Only three letters at the beginning and nine at the end survive of this inscription. But E. M. Antoniadis<sup>22</sup> first identified these with a known epigram of the Palatine Anthology which reads as follows (letters preserved *in situ* are underlined):

*"Ας οἱ πλάνοι καθεῖλον ἐνθάδ' εἰκόνας  
ἄνακτες ἐστήλωσαν εὐσεβεῖς πάλιν.*

"The images which the impostors had cast down here, pious emperors have again set up."<sup>23</sup> It is obvious that the inscription commemorates the fact that iconodule emperors (at least two of them, since the plural is used) have put up new images, replacing the ones that had been destroyed<sup>24</sup> by their iconoclast predecessors. There cannot be any doubt that the apse mosaic is meant here. But when was this done?

There are two possibilities: a. the twenty-eight year period following the first restoration of icons by the Seventh Oecumenical Council in 787, essentially the decade 787–97, during most of which (787–90, 792–97) Constantine VI and his mother, Irene, reigned jointly, if not harmoniously; and b. those years that followed the final restoration of images (843), during most of which Michael III reigned simultaneously with his mother, Theodora, his sister Thekla, and, later, his friend Basil I the Macedonian. Scholarly opinion has constantly opted for this second possibility, presumably because there is no record of restoration of mosaics in St. Sophia in the decade after 787, whereas, beginning with the joint reign of Michael

<sup>21</sup>Mango-Hawkins, "Apse Mosaics," 140.

<sup>22</sup>E. M. Antoniadis, *Ἐκφρασίς τῆς Ἀγίας Σοφίας*, 3 (Leipzig–Athens, 1909), 29 f.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Mango, *Materials*, 82.

<sup>24</sup>The use of the word *καθεῖλον* suggests that the pre-iconoclastic decoration was destroyed rather than covered or otherwise hidden. This strong interpretation of the word, mandatory when it refers to a mosaic, is important for our purposes because it excludes the possibility that we might have here a pre-iconoclastic mosaic.

III and Basil I, the Great Church was decorated with icons. This preference, however, is by no means warranted: the silence of the sources concerning the iconographic activities of Irene does not necessarily mean that such activities did not take place, especially when one thinks of the paucity of the available documentation regarding her reign. There are, instead, definite difficulties in accepting the other hypothesis, that the inscription refers to activities during Michael III's reign. Let me explain.

In his oration, read on 29 March 867, Photios declared clearly that the icon of the Virgin, about which he was speaking, was the first to be restored after the "Isaurian" godlessness had destroyed the previous decoration—and that it was the first in a series of holy images that were being executed at about the same time.<sup>25</sup> If the Virgin about which Photios spoke was a standing Hodegetria, as I have shown, it follows that on this 29 March 867 the apse mosaic of the enthroned Virgin was not to be seen in St. Sophia. Consequently, if one wanted at all cost to attribute it to the second half of the ninth century, one should place it after 870, when Basil I, having assassinated Michael III (24 September 867), took his own elder son, Constantine, as co-emperor.

But such a late date, though not absolutely impossible, presents certain epigraphical difficulties. The surviving letters of the inscription (fig. 2), especially the capital "beta," terminating with a line (B), and the capital "alpha," with the broken horizontal bar (A), are definitely archaic and point to the eighth or early ninth century. It is true that these forms survive in some later inscriptions on stone. But the mosaics of the north tympanum of St. Sophia, which seem to date from the second patriarchate of Photios (877–86), have a lettering which is quite different from that of our inscription (fig. 3).<sup>26</sup>

Considering the remarks above, it would be preferable to place the making of the apse mosaic in the iconodule interlude of 787–815, more probably between 787 and 797.<sup>27</sup> Why did Photios not know of it in 867? One must assume—and this is my main point—that the apse mosaic had been covered during the second Iconoclasm and was, therefore, no longer visible at the time of Photios.

<sup>25</sup> Texts conveniently gathered by Mango, *Materials*, 94–95.

<sup>26</sup> C. Mango and E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul. The Church Fathers of the North Tympanum," *DOP*, 26 (1972), 1–41, esp. figs. 15, 24, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Needless to say, the mosaic inscription has nothing to do with fourteenth-century epigraphy.

In his oration he clearly says, referring to the icon of the Virgin, that St. Sophia had been deprived (by the Iconoclasts) (*ἐχήρευε, ἀπεστέοητο*) of the beauty and splendor that it once possessed; he speaks of wounds, scars, and blemish which had been inflicted upon the church and which by his time had been healed—a reference to icons that had been destroyed (scars) or covered (blemish); his declaration that "the image of the Mother rises up from the very depths of oblivion" indicates that Photios knew of images of the Virgin which had existed in the Great Church before being obliterated by the Iconoclasts.<sup>28</sup>

What most probably he did not know was that an early mosaic existed in the apse; nor did his contemporaries know it, fifty-two years after it was covered at the beginning of the second Iconoclasm. Very likely the Virgin Hodegetria, probably flanked by two angels—a well-known pre-iconoclastic motif<sup>29</sup>—had been painted in 867 on the (decorated?) plaster that covered the apse. It was to this new image that Photios refers; the central figure of the Virgin must have been similar to the one that appears on Photios' lead seal<sup>30</sup>—similar not only in general theme, but also in minor details, such as the Child reclining and the Virgin turning her eyes to him (cf. fig. 6).

At that time the mosaic's explicitly anti-iconoclastic inscription was also covered. That it had entered into the Palatine Anthology should not be considered a contradiction of this hypothesis: we know that the compiler of the Anthology copied it from the ciborium (*κιβωτῷ*) of St. Sophia, for this is clearly stated in the lemma; and only later the Byzantines became aware that this inscription appeared also on the conch (*εἰς τὸν μύακα*).<sup>31</sup> Consequently, this uncertainty of the sources as to the place of the inscription in the tenth century should rather be seen as an indication supporting the hypothesis that the apse inscription was not then visible.

<sup>28</sup> Aristarches, 300–2, 304; cf. Mango, *The Homilies*, 290–93.

<sup>29</sup> Cf., e.g., the Panagia Aggeloktistos of Cyprus (eighth century): V. Lazarev, *Storia della pittura bizantina* (Turin, 1967), 74 note 18 and pl. 52.

<sup>30</sup> Laurent, *Corpus, loc. cit.*, no. 9; cf. V. Laurent, *Les sceaux byzantins du Médailleur Vatican* (Vatican City, 1962), no. 152 (pl. xxi).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Mango, *Materials*, 82, and S. G. Mercati, "Sulle iscrizioni di Santa Sofia," *Bessarione*, 26 (1922), 204–5. It may be supposed that the ciborium inscription, covered by the Iconoclasts (who would have been reluctant to destroy a precious object), was uncovered some time after 843; or that the text of the apse inscription, copied before 815, was preserved via the literary tradition and was inscribed on St. Sophia's ciborium after 843. But all this is pure—and unnecessary—speculation.

The above hypothesis finds further support in the testimony of Anthony, archbishop of Novgorod, who visited St. Sophia in 1200: he declares that the famous painter Lazaros the Confessor had painted (*napisal*) the Virgin holding the Child, and two Angels in the sanctuary of St. Sophia. The validity of this information has already been properly evaluated.<sup>32</sup> What is significant for our purposes is that Anthony seems to speak of a painting—not of a mosaic—as decorating the eastern apse of the Great Church. This fits with the similar declaration of Photios. Undoubtedly, this was the painting that Patriarchs Isidoros and Philotheos would have seen in the middle of the fourteenth century.

Then came the extensive repair work executed in the Church following the earthquakes. I suppose that it was in the course of those repairs that

the existence of the eighth-century mosaics in the apse was revealed—and the mosaics were dutifully uncovered. A mosaic of the Virgin, several centuries old, was seen again, as if it were new, in the apse of the Great Church. Such an event could not but strike pious imaginations and give rise to all kinds of interpretations; but it occurred at a time about which no historical account has survived; thus it is unrecorded. However, Patriarch Neilos (1380–88), who undoubtedly interpreted the event as a good omen, had this “newly found” image reproduced on his seal, as did all his successors. The image appears also in the Peribleptos of Mystra. Thus, the apse mosaic of St. Sophia, a major artistic work of unique importance of the iconodule interlude (787–815), created toward the end of the eighth century and covered early in the ninth, having survived in oblivion for five and a half centuries, experienced at last, in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, the glory of being held, deservedly, in high favor.

<sup>32</sup> *Itinéraires russes en Orient*, trans. Mme B. De Khitrowo (Geneva, 1889), 108; Mango-Hawkins, “Apse Mosaics,” 142 and 144–45 (for discussion on the person of Lazaros).